

Remarks by Ms. Brandi James

Women's History Month

American Corner – Ibadan

March 29, 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen

Friends

All protocols observed

It is my pleasure to speak today at the American Corner in Ibadan during this important Women's History Month event.

Every day, in all corners of the world, women demonstrate courage by pursuing, on behalf of all, an equal voice. Women must be heard not just because they are the other half of the population, but because they are a fundamental building block for free, open, prosperous societies.

In an effort to make sure that the struggle of women, both in the United States and around the world, would not go unnoticed, the U.S. Congress in 1981 passed a resolution establishing National Women's History Week. In 1987, Congress expanded the week to a month, and has since passed a resolution every year declaring March as *Women's History Month*.

This year's theme, *Generations of Women Moving History Forward*, celebrates the wisdom and tenacity of prior and future generations of women and recognizes the power of generations working together. And it is in this time of reflection on past achievements of generations before me, and the inspiration that has been left for future generations, that I have the honor of speaking with you today.

The United States has not always been a land of opportunity for women. In the United States, women's history is the history of women's struggle for their rights as

citizens, their struggle to participate fully in the electoral process, and their ongoing work to ensure good governance. Throughout the 19th century, U.S. women were not allowed the freedoms that men enjoyed under the law. They could not attend college or earn a living. If they were married, they had no legal power to enter into a contract, or to get a divorce or to take custody of their won children.

Married or single, they were not allowed to vote, or to be elected to office. Obtaining the right to vote in 1920, only after decades of committed struggle, inspired American women to countless other victories in various arenas, and the first half of the 20th century saw women making breakthrough gains in fields long considered outside their traditional roles as wives, mothers and caretakers.

As women in the United States moved from rural areas to the cities, and with the onset of the two World Wars, women were forced to find paid work outside the home. But women were not employed on the same basis as men, and discrimination in all forms of employment was the norm in the early part of the 20th century. Thanks in part to the tireless efforts of women of an earlier generation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, prohibiting discrimination in the workplace on the basis of sex.

This was followed by court cases assuring greater reproductive freedom for women, laws providing minimum wage protection for domestic workers, tougher child support laws, laws protecting pension rights for widowed and divorced women, and laws protecting women against violence.

Today, an important development in women's empowerment has been the increased presence and influence of women in the U.S. political arena, as exemplified by the election of the first-ever female speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives – one of the most powerful positions in the United States government. Nancy Pelosi's first career was as a housewife, and it was not until her last of five children began college that she decided to run for Congress at age 47. She rose through the ranks and now, at age 67,

Nancy Pelosi controls the flow of legislation in the House and controls the purse strings of the U.S. government.

Upon accepting her position, Nancy Pelosi stated “For our daughters and our granddaughters, today we have broken the marble ceiling.” Nancy Pelosi, former First Lady Hilary Clinton – who is now aspiring to become America’s first female president – and the 65% of women citizens who voted in the 2004 presidential elections - making sure their voices were heard - are standing on the shoulders of women giants of previous generations.

But for all that has been accomplished in women’s history, there remains a lot to be done, both in the United States and around the world. The US is strongly committed to helping women be heard and to advancing the equality of women – indeed, achieving global respect for women is a U.S. foreign policy imperative. The United States provides hundreds of millions of dollars each year for concrete projects benefiting women everywhere.

As many as 55 million girls continue to be shut out of formal schooling and millions of school-aged girls work in domestic service; in 2002, President Bush launched a five-year Africa Education Initiative to augment funding support for Africa’s education programs by \$200 million and to provide 550,000 girls in 40 African countries with scholarships.

The U.S. supports several programs to counter gender-based violence, including a \$15 million initiative to combat violence against women in Darfur, and has provided more than \$20 million since 2000 to refugee programs focusing on gender based violence. The \$15 billion President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief ensures that the programs it supports meet the unique needs of women and girls, including victims of sex trafficking, rape, abuse and exploitation.

There has also been increased emphasis on assistance to public-private partnerships for business development; micro-credit loans for aspiring women

entrepreneurs; maternal and child health care programs; and leadership, political, and advocacy training. And there is a human reality behind each of these efforts: millions of individual women who are now able to keep their families healthy; start new businesses; vote in free elections; and even serve their countries as government ministers, judges, journalists, and in many other ways. No one can argue that when women are given tools to succeed, such as education and economic and political opportunities, they create stronger families and healthier, more vibrant communities, and directly and measurably increase economic development.

Earlier this month, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice paid tribute to 10 women from around the world who have demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in changing their societies for the benefit of future generations, in the face of great obstacles. I would like to highlight the five women I found most encouraging, and to also demonstrate the wide range of issues women face, and can tackle with determination.

- Susana Trimarco de Veron of Argentina was honored for her efforts to combat human trafficking of women; after the kidnapping of her 23 year old daughter, Veron launched an intensive search that has since reclaimed 100 young women from bondage.
- Siti Mulia of Indonesia led a team of 11 experts that produced a groundbreaking project to revise Indonesia's Islamic legal code. Condemned by conservative Muslim groups and threatened with death by more radical groups, Mulia has continued to push for a ban of polygamy and forced marriages and the raising of the legal marriage age for girls from 16 to 19 years old, both aimed at preventing domestic violence and child abuse.
- Ilze Jaunalksne, a journalist and anchor for one of Latvia's leading television news programs, braved threats against her life to expose political corruption in Latvia. Her courageous expose of a vote-buying scandal resulted in the indictment

of prominent government leaders and the resignation of a government minister. Despite having her phone wiretapped and enduring threats of violence, Jaunalksne states that this will be a lesson not only for some journalists who also became a victim like me, but also for other citizens who now can be more confident about opposing corrupt officials.

- Mariya Didi, one of only six women in the 50-member parliament of Maldives, was honored for organizing the first women's right rally in the country in spite of critics who threw bags of oil at her and had her motorbike run off the road by a car filled with government supporters. Didi was no stranger to adversity; she campaigned for her position in parliament as an independent when she was five months pregnant with her third child. Didi stated, 'I wanted to be sure the child inside me would get some rights.'
- Jennifer Williams of Zimbabwe, founder of Women of Zimbabwe Arise – a civil society organization established in 2003 to protest government abuses – has been arrested more than 25 times for leading protests against Robert Mugabe's regime, enduring harassment and physical abuse. In her acceptance speech, Williams noted, "hardships fall especially hard on women because it is the children who beg mama for more food or want to know why they can no longer go to school when there is no money for school fees."

Women are often overlooked as agents of positive change, but the dedication and courage of the women I've mentioned today, representing millions of women around the world, tells a different reality.

This month, we honor the spirit, leadership, and hard work of not only American women, but all women around the globe.

Thank you.

